

## Abstract 175

**TITLE:** Gender issues related to first drug injection among street youth in Montreal, Canada

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**OBJECTIVES:** To compare street girls and street boys regarding first drug injection (FDI).

**METHODS:** We conducted triangulation of data addressing FDI collected in two studies using different methodologies: 1) a prospective cohort study on HIV risk behaviors among street youth (SY) started in 01/1995; 2) a qualitative study carried out in 1996-97, using semi-structured interviews to study sharing of drug injection equipment among SY. Subjects in this analysis were 14 to 22 years old and started injecting in 1990 or after.

**RESULTS:** Among the cohort participants (n=647, 71% males), 45% of females and 43% of males were already injecting at baseline (p=0.64). As of 10/31/98, of the non-injectors at baseline, 15% of females and 10% of males reported having started to inject (p=0.11). For this analysis, only the 238 SY (62% boys) having started injecting in 1990 or after and 14 to 22 years old at time of interview were included. Mean age at FDI was 16.3 years among girls and 16.7 years among boys. At FDI, 58% of girls had been injected by a friend or acquaintance, 26% by themselves, 10% by a lover and 6.7% by someone else; among boys these figures were 52%, 35%, 10% and 3.4% respectively (p=0.38). More girls than boys reported that they first injected with needles already used by someone else (24% vs 10% p=0.002). In the qualitative study, 14 out of 25 participants were boys. Most youth were injected by friends/acquaintance (13) and some by their lover (3). Girls seemed to be more pro-active than boys regarding their FDI, looking for the drug they wanted to try and acquiring needles at a pharmacy or a needle exchange program. Boys seemed to start drug injection more impulsively. Many girls started injecting with a female friend; they did not think that sharing equipment would be dangerous since they were both injecting for the first time "*We knew that we had nothing* (no disease)". Street boys did not report starting injection with a used needle but many were not sure where the needle came from.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Injection drug use is equally frequent among street girls and street boys. At FDI, according to our quantitative data, few SY have been injected by their lovers and there is no difference between girls and boys. According to our qualitative data moreover, many girls were pro-active in planning their FDI and often started injecting with a female friend. Both studies seem to contradict the common view that women tend to be initiated into injection by an experienced male partner with whom they are emotionally involved. Concerning the risk of HIV acquisition at FDI, a priori, our quantitative data would suggest that the risk is higher among girls. However, looking at our qualitative data, the fact that girls often initiate with other novices is reassuring. Initiation into injection drug use is a complex social phenomenon that deserves more comprehensive research.

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